Research Proposal on:

Life of workers in tea gardens of North Bengal: *A study on food security issues.*

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I. Introduction:

Tea is a popular drink across the world and in India it is one of the most common drinks to start a day. This popular drink originated in China who once had a monopoly, later to break the Chinese monopoly tea was introduced in India by the British. The climatic condition in North East India was found to be favorable for tea cultivation and hence tea cultivation flourished in the region which later also spread to some parts of South India.

India is the second largest producer of tea after China. As per Tea Board of India, India recorded an annual production of 1233.14 million kilograms of tea in 2015-16. Assam contributes to nearly 52% followed by North Bengal which contributes to nearly 26% of total tea production in India. Although tea industry flourished in India yet the condition of the tea garden workers did not change with time. Media and journals reported hunger deaths in the North Bengal tea gardens. India is developing fast in every field yet hunger deaths are harsh reality of the country. India ranked 100th among the 119 countries, marked 'with serious hunger problem' in the Global Hunger Index 2017 report, released by International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). The grave of the problem can be identified by its ranking in GHI as in 2016 India ranked 97th among the 118 countries and in 2015 it ranked 80th among the 104 countries surveyed.

An attempt by IFPRI was made in 2008 to get the India State Hunger Index (ISHI) like the Global Hunger Index and a comparison among the States in India were done in a report. The report revealed that Madhya Pradesh was the worst affected State in the country with an 'extremely alarming' hunger problem. West Bengal was ranked 8th among the 17 States with an 'alarming level' of Hunger problem (Menon, Deolalikar, & Bhaskar, 2009). The National Sample Survey Organization(NSSO) in India published a report entitled "Perceived Adequacy of Food Consumption in Indian Households 2004-2005" based on the NSS 61st Round, in July 2004- June 2005. The report revealed that "The percentage of rural household not getting enough food every day in some months of the year was the highest in West Bengal (10.6 per cent) followed by Orissa (4.8 per cent) and the least affected by food inadequacy were Haryana and Rajasthan. The proportion of those households who did not get enough food every day in any month of the year was highest in the State of Assam (3.6 per cent) followed by Orissa and West Bengal (1.3 per cent each)." If the two figures i.e the number of household not getting enough food seasonally and the number of households not getting enough food daily are taken together then West Bengal will top the list with 12% of the rural house hold facing occasional and regular hunger (Bandhopadhay, 2007).

Among these households who falls the victim of poverty and food insecurity are the Tea garden workers in the North Bengal, whose plight remains unheard. Reports of isolated starvation deaths came out in the print and electronic media in the early years of this millennium, in the North Bengal. Though, the government denied any such news of starvation deaths in the North Bengal it accepted the fact that malnutrition is rampant in the area.

The research would aim to explore the condition of the tea garden workers in the present day context where there are several government schemes implemented to address the issue of food security. It would put light into the fact that whether there is adequate availability and accessibility of food by the families of the tea garden workers throughout the year, as it a basic need for survival.

II. Problem Analysis:

Tea is an extremely popular beverage in India and Darjeeling tea is famous for its aroma and flavor. But the workers who work in these tea gardens taste the bitter flavor of life. Between 2000 and 2015, Fourteen Hundred (1400) people have died in 17 tea Gardens in the North Bengal. Severe malnutrition has been the main cause of death in these estates (Chaudhuri, 2015). It is said that, Out of the 276 tea gardens in four districts Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar and Alipurduar approximately 31 have shut down or are sick. And the lives of 4, 80,000 families who employed by those gardens are in a crisis –women and children being the worst affected. With no alternative jobs or income, it a daily struggle to survive (Roy, 2017). In the working estates too, conditions of the tea garden workers are pathetic because of miserably low wages (Rs.90 to 95), non availability of drinking water, sanitation and food items. According to the law, tea garden workers are entitled to get provident fund payments, bonuses, pension (for retired workers), ration, housing, water, education and health facilities. But the reality is grim with most of the tea gardens been shut or sick, housing and medical facilities are in a shambles. Financial mismanagement is rife—many estates are not depositing the provident fund contribution deducted from workers wages, schools are non functional thereby affecting the education of the children in the tea estates.
A survey by the Siliguri Welfare Association in July 2014 found the body mass index of tea workers to be as low as 14 in some estates. “The WHO has stipulated that anything less than 18.5 BMI constitutes famine affected population,” says Abhijit Majumdar, secretary of the organisation. Out of 1,272 workers at Raipur Tea Garden in Jalpaiguri, 539 or 42 per cent had a BMI of less than 18.5 (in India ideal BMI is 23-24). As many as 384 workers had a BMI of 17, 285 below 16, and 140 less than 14. Similar surveys were conducted at Red Bank, Bandapani, Diana and Kathalguri tea gardens and same results found, says Majumdar.
Out of 273 tea estates, only 166 have hospitals. Out of these 166, only 56 tea estates have full time residential doctors. Other 110 tea estates' hospitals depend on visiting doctors. Among doctors of 166 tea estates, only 74 doctors have degree of MBBS, others are non MBBS. Out of 166 tea estates having hospitals, 116 do not have any nurse. 107 tea estates (hills 64, Terai 20 and Dooars 23) do not have any hospital. Out of 273 tea estates, 85 do not have any dispensary. Ten tea estates have neither hospital nor dispensary. Out of 273 tea estates, primary health centres (PHCs) exist in only 160, 113 tea estates (hills 38, Terai 23

and Dooars 52) do not have any PHC. Out of 273 tea estates, 160 provide ambulance. Many of these ambulances are not up to the standard (Bera, 2014).

The starvation deaths and the other related problems like water scarcity, closed schools etc are also an indicator that the workers are not getting the social welfare/security schemes of the government. The chronic violation of basic rights of tea garden workers calls for immediate attentions from all quarters. The state must come forward to provide suitable livelihood opportunities to them and to enable them to access basic services like health and education.

III. Gaps in the existing Knowledge:

Food is one of the basic needs of human being for their survival but in developing country like India food is not adequately available for all. World Bank (1986) defined food security as 'access by all people at all times to enough food for an active healthy life'. Later in 1996 FAO came up with a broader definition of food security 'Food Security at the individual, household, national and global levels [is achieved] when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.'

Many research and academic reports have been done in the Tea Garden area which dealt with labor issues (wages and health risks), production and marketing of tea. But limited research solely focused on the food security of the tea garden workers. There are many reports and newspaper clippings on starvation death in the tea plantations. So it can be said that there is a scarcity of published material on the food security aspect of the plantation workers in the area.

In this backdrop the research is intended to explore the reasons behind such situation in the tea estates.

IV. Objectives of the Research:

The broad objective of the study is to explore the reasons for food insecurity in the tea gardens. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. To explore the socio cultural condition of tea garden workers.
2. To understand the livelihood options of the families in relation to food security.
3. To understand the factors that affects the availability and accessibility of food for the households, in the study area.
4. To understand the varying food insecurity, in the tea gardens, throughout the calendar year.
5. To understand the access of tea garden workers to social welfare schemes implemented by the State/Central Government/NGOs.

V. Significance of the Study:

Though there are studies on the tea gardens but not much has been focused on the food security aspect of the tea garden laborers. Literature review reveals that there were/are provisions of health, education, livelihood yet the tea garden workers have to face several hazards. There is persistent conflict between workers and the management.

The outcome of the study would help in understanding the context of food insecurity in the tea gardens and also the implication of the National Food Security Act (2013), in addressing the food insecurity situation in the region. Thereby it can be used for further referencing in framing strategies/policies in the future.

VI. Scope of the Study:

The scope of the study is restricted to the sick and closed tea gardens in North Bengal and would be centered on food security issues of the tea garden workers. It would look into account the food security aspect i.e their food habits, the availability and accessibility to food grains, livelihood profile of the families and its impact on health and education. It would also try to explore why irrespective of existing provisions of welfare services the workers are in stressed situation?

VII. Research Questions:

- Is the National Food Security Act, 2013 successful in addressing the hunger situation in the tea gardens of North Bengal?
- Do positive legislative provisions fail to meet the basic need of food?
- What role the government and other conflict resolution machineries playing to resolve the stressed situation?
- Are the workers aware about their Right to Food?
- Is the food insecurity situation seasonal or prevalent throughout the calendar year?
- Is the stressful situation leading to diversification of livelihood in the tea gardens?

VIII. Definition of key terms:

Food Security: World Bank (1986) defined food security as 'access by all people at all times to enough food for an active healthy life'. Later in 1996 FAO came up with a broader

definition of food security 'Food Security at the individual, household, national and global level [is achieved] when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.' UN data of 2008 says that nearly 20% of the chronically hungry people in the World live in India. It is a fact, that this problem of food insecurity is not prevalent in all the sections of the society rather it is confined to certain marginalized section of the society like the tribals, unorganized labourers, marginalized farmers and the tea plantation workers.

As per the National Food Security Act 2013, food security means the supply of the entitled quantity of food grains and meal to the priority households identified by the government. The provision states that every household identified would be entitled to receive five kilograms of food grains per person per month at subsidized prices from the State Government under the Public Distribution System.

Ensuring food security is a basic goal of social justice, apart from development of adequate human resource. Right to food is inherent to life with dignity guaranteed by Article 21 in the Indian constitution. The article says that "no person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law" Further article 39(a) under the directive principles of State Principles state that the State shall directs its policies towards securing its citizen both men and women to have the right to an adequate means of livelihood. Article 47 directs the State to raise the level of nutrition and the standard of living of its people and to improve public health. Hence it can be said that the State has a liability towards its people for their food security as food is the basic need for survival.

Hunger is the body's natural urge to replenish its food stores and continuous hunger over a period results in starvation causing numerous physical, mental side effects due to a prolonged lack of nutrition. Both are caused due to not having sufficient food. The reasons of not having sufficient food is a combination of a number of factors like lack of employment, lack of savings and some natural factors(natural disaster etc.). Amartya Sen has argued that, starvation is the characteristics of some people not having enough food to eat not because lack of availability of food but because of entitlement failure (Sen, Poverty and Famines, 1981).

There are three components of food security namely production and procurement, storage and distribution. All these functions are performed through the Public Distribution system in the country (Lenka, 2017). If any of the component of food security is affected it would affect the people. Food is a matter of Right and every individual has the Right to food- it is an entitlement to be free from hunger, which derives from the assertion that the society has enough resources, both economic and institutional, to ensure that everyone is adequately nourished. The primary responsibility for ensuring Right to food rests on the State, because the state alone commands the resources (economic and institutional) required to protect everyone from hunger, and because the state is generally responsible for safeguarding constitutional rights. In some circumstances at least, the responsibility for protecting the right to food is a shared responsibility, involving not only the state, but also other institutions or individuals (Dreze, 2004).

The tea industry in India have been said to have been going through a crisis situation since the early 1990s. Some of the key reasons for the crisis a fall in tea auction prices, decline in exports, closure and abandonment of tea gardens resulting in curtailment of wages and benefits by the planters. The crisis declined the living condition of the workers and worsening human security. (Ellis, 1998).
For this research, the researcher would follow the global definition of food security by FAO (1996).

Tea Plantation Worker: Plantation referred to a group of settlers or a political unit formed by it under British Colonialism, especially in North America and West Indies (ILO, 1950).But later it acquired a broader connotation, which denote large scale enterprise in agricultural units and the development of certain agricultural resources of tropical countries in accordance with the methods of western industry. The products were mainly for export.
The Plantation Labour Act 1951 defines plantation as any land used or intends to be used for growing tea, coffee rubber or cinchona which admeasures 25 acres or more and in which 30 or more persons are employed or were employed on any day of the preceding 12 months.
Plantation worker means a person employed in the plantation for hire or reward, whether directly or through agency, to do any work, skilled, unskilled, clerical or manual. It exempts certain categories of worker like medical officer, any person whose monthly wage is more than Rs.300 or any employee who work in the managerial capacity.

The Plantation Labour (Amendment) Act 2010 further includes that a person employed on contract for more than 60 days in a year would be considered as plantation worker. The

amended Act specifies that the term 'worker' does not include any person whose monthly income exceeds Rs.10,000. Also a person who works in the managerial and administrative capacity notwithstanding that his monthly wages do not exceed Rs. 10000 is also not included in the category of workers.

In the research the researcher would use the term tea garden workers instead of plantation worker as here the study area is tea gardens. As far as definition goes the researcher accepts the definition given in 'The Plantation Labour (Amendment) Act 2010'.

The tea industry in India began with the setup of Assam Company in 1839. The potential for growing tea in Assam was discovered in 1824 by Major Robert Bruce.

The British East India Company had a monopoly over trade with China and used to import tea from China. In 1833, the monopoly was cancelled by British Parliament and then the company decided to explore tea cultivation on a commercial scale in Assam. After three decades, tea plantation started in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerela. Labors in the plantation were mainly recruited from the tribal community of central India-the Chotanagpur area (Bhowmik, 2011).

Livelihood:

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stress and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base (Chambers and Conway, 1991).

A broader definition of livelihood has been given by Eliss (1998), he defined livelihood as a whole range of activities that households undertake for maximizing their wellbeing.

For research purpose the definition by Chambers and Conway, 1991 would be used.

Sick/Closed Tea Gardens:

The Tea Board of India has set certain parameters based on which the gradations of the tea gardens are done. Some of the parameters are field practices (yield, productivity, re-plantation and irrigation), agricultural practices (pruning, age of tea bushes, pest management etc), Workers' Welfare (as per PLA and workers-employers agreement) and quality certification. The tea garden which fails to meet the parameters is graded as 'sick'. And the tea gardens where the production is stopped over a period of time is termed as 'closed'.

IX. Review of literature:

History of Tea Plantation in West Bengal: The beginning of Tea Plantation in India traces backs to 1839 with the commencement of Assam Company. Robert Bruce discovered the potential for growing tea in 1824 when he came across indigenous tea bushes in Assam. At that time the East India Company had a monopoly over trade with China and was importing tea from there. When in 1833 the British Parliament Cancelled the monopoly, the directors of East India Co. decided to explore the possibilities of growing tea on a commercial basis (Bhowmik, 2011). This resulted in clearance of forests in the hills of Assam. From there after 3 decades tea plantation was started in west Bengal as it was found that the environmental factors for growing tea was similar in West Bengal and Assam.

To get cheap labour tribals from the Chotanagpur region were made to migrate to the plantation area. There were two methods of recruitment one is indentured labour and the second was through recruitment agents. The recruitment agents used to roam around the poverty and drought stricken areas of the Chotanagpur region and lure people for the plantation work assuring them better livelihoods.

Exploitation of plantation labour by the plantation owners had been prevalent since its inception and that has been seen in various academic research, journals etc. Post Colonial situation brought some relief to the plantation workers as some laws were passed granting protection and welfare to the labourers. In 1952, for the first time Statutory minimum wages were fixed for tea plantation labour (Government, 1966).Subsequently there were other Acts which granted some facilities to the workers.

These changes resulted in formalization of relationship between planters and workers. The Plantation Labour Act of 1951 was the most important act passed in favour of the workers. It included provisions of housing, health, hygiene, education and social welfare.

West Bengal is the second largest Tea producing State in the country. The tea plantation in India is spread over two districts of the State i.e Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling and they collectively contribute 20% of the tea produced in the country (TeaBoard, 2002).

The tea industry in West Bengal has been in a state of crisis. Many industries have become sick and many other have been closed putting the workers in a state of pity. As the tea plantation sites are in the interior areas, the abandonment of the plantation areas by the

owners and managers have left the workers in a terrible condition. The welfare services which were provided by the owners to the workers are no longer available along with wages. They are left with no electricity, safe drinking water, health and education (West Bengal Advisor to the Commissioners Of The Supreme Court, 2004). The out migration has increased. Women and Children are the worst affected due to the closure of tea gardens.
According to the 51st Annual Report 2004-05 of Tea Board of India, a total of 118 teagardens were reportedly closed between the years 2000-2005 that had affected 68,442 workers. In 2007 in Jalpaiguri district, West Bengal, there were 13 abandoned and closed tea gardens. The health centre sources say that diseases related to prolonged and acute malnutrition have increased and the death rate of children has risen significantly. (Centre for Education and Communication, 2007).

To explore the present situation it is very essential to know the history of tea gardens in India. The articles and reports referred for research purpose helped the researcher to develop an understanding on how tea cultivation was started in India and how it evolved over these years.

Social Security Schemes in relation to food security in the Tea Gardens:

It is more than a decade that the crisis in the tea gardens is continuing. The very fact that the tea garden labourers are living in a state of bondage even in the 21st century raises serious concern about the identity and rights of these workers. It is also a fact that the tea garden workers in the North Bengal have been virtually living in isolation with complete dependence on the employers.

Starvation deaths in the recent years are beyond food. It also reflects the failure of the government institutions that are liable support the people in need. Thus the need of the hour is to implement existing schemes with a mission to address the food insecurity of the workers in the area.

It is a fact that the provisions of the Plantation of Labour Act 1951 were not implemented by the owners in true sense. Had the Act been implemented in the true spirit, all houses would have become permanent structures in 1969 (Bhowmik, 2011).

The establishment of Tea Board in 1954 was done to bring development in the tea plantation sector. It was set up with the objective of both research and Development as well as for implementing welfare schemes for the workers. More specifically, it was directed towards the development in the sphere of trade, extension of area under tea cultivation, improvement in quality of tea, promotion of cooperative efforts among growers and manufacturers (Tea Board of India website). But if we look at its activities much of it revolves around the production, and quality development of tea and the welfare activities too are in the field of education like providing stipends. No records have been found where the Board tries to intervene in the food security aspect of the laborers.

Food crisis shot up so much in the year 2004 that the Supreme Court Right to Food bench passed certain orders for the closed tea gardens. The Government of West Bengal was instructed to:

• Declare all plantation workers in closed gardens as Below Poverty Line (BPL) with immediate effect.

• Supply the garden labourers with Antyodaya Anna Yojna (AAY) food grains @ Rs 3/kg of rice and Rs 2/kg of wheat. The quantity allowed would be 35kg/family/month. • Send in a medical team consisting of doctors, nurses, pharmacists with medicines, and at least twice a week to each garden.

• Make sure that each worker at least gets 15 days of work each month under the Sampoorna Grameen Rojgar Yojna (SGRY). In gardens closed for more than a year, the workers would get an unemployment allowance of Rs 500/month.

In order to provide temporary relief to the workers of the abandoned gardens, and their families, workers of several tea gardens were planned to be brought under relief measures under various programmes. These included supplementary nutrition programme under the ICDS, mobile health clinics under the State Health Development Project, drinking water under the PHE (Public Health Engineering) Department, rural water supply programme under the Zilla Parishad, cooked mid day meal scheme under the School Education Department etc (Dasgupta, 2009).

Tea Garden areas were formally brought under the purview of Panchayati Raj institutions in the late 1990s. The people residing in the tea gardens expected that they would get the benefits of the welfare schemes implemented by the Panchayat. However things did not happen as expected and the welfare scheme reached the workers on an ad hoc manner depending on the cooperation between the Panchayat functionaries and the tea garden managements. The report by the committee of Secretaries recommended that the emphasis would be given on implementing the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Scheme (MGNREGS) in the tea garden areas and activities like digging pit, building kitchen garden, land development activities would be triggered to benefit individuals through the scheme by not only through payments of wages but also through resource creation at individual level (Government of West Bengal , 2012). The MGNREGA was initiated in the year 2005 but its implementation in the tea gardens was very insignificant because of the lack of cooperation of the tea estate managers. Though it is the right of a person to get 100 days of employment under the scheme but its implementation in the tea gardens have been disappointing, with workers getting 20 days of employment during a year and rather than a matter of Right it has become a matter of providing relief. Another significant aspect that needs to be mentioned is that though the tea plantation labours has always been in poverty yet not even 20% of the population have the Below Poverty Level (BPL) Card (Nagarik Mancha and NESPON, 2010).If implemented properly the MGNREGA has the potential to provide the tea garden workers with wage employment which would bring a positive impact in their life and increase their access to food.

The National Food Security Act 2013 is yet another milestone in addressing the food security issue in the country. Since its enactment the government has been trying hard to implement

the same. In West Bengal the scheme was implemented from the year 2016 and named as West Bengal Food Security Rules 2016. Prior to this the government provided 'Targeted Public Distribution System' in the tea Gardens where the dealership had been given to the Tea Garden Managers. The implementation of the Act also known as Khadya Sathi has been successful in providing Rice and Wheat at Rs.2 per Kg to almost 80% of the State population including the tea garden regions. Under the present scenario too, the tea garden managers are the dealers. They are provided with subsidized food grains at the rate of Rs.2 per kg(eligibility is 35 kg per family per month) which is distributed to the workers by the tea garden management at the nominal rate of 0.40 paisa per kg. Some activists working in the area argued that the present scheme has done more benefit to the tea estate managers than to the workers who are in distressed condition because it has reduced the cost burden which the tea estates used to bear for providing food grains. They opined that it would have been more beneficial if the food grains provided under the scheme would have been given to the workers addition to the rations provided by the tea estates (Nagchoudhury, 2016).

Here one notable fact is that the tea garden managers act as the ration dealers in the area but there is no record on what is the condition of the implementation of the National Food Security Act in closed or abandoned tea gardens where the tea garden managers are absent. Also it is seen that despite of their poor living conditions many workers are not recognized as Below Poverty Line. This means that they would not be eligible for rations provided under the Public Distribution System nor any rural subsidized schemes meant for benefitting the poorer section.

X. Implication with Social work Practice:

Social workers work towards equality and empowerment. Food is one of the basic needs of human life and when a section of society is not getting the opportunity to fulfill this basic need for survival that implies that their Right to food is being curtailed. Theoretical understanding of hunger is also essential. The reason for not having sufficient food is a combination of various factors like lack of income, employment opportunities, availability and access to resources. There are some aspect which are related to nature (like disasters, forest produces etc) and these things cannot be touched upon. The factors like lack of income, employment and access to food grains/items are certain factors that can be studied and policies can be framed accordingly to improve the situation.

Advocacy on the Rights of the Tea Plantation Workers is another implication with the Social Work Practice.

Social workers also has also important role in intervention. Generating awareness on health and livelihood aspect would improve the situation where the workers and their families can make informed choices. Also intervention through particular issue based/need based

programmes in the stressed tea gardens can bring positive changes in the lives of tea workers.

XI. Methodology :

Systematic methodology is a pre requisite of any research study as it has direct bearing on the validity and relevance of the research outcomes or findings.

The research would use the eclectic method hence both quantitative and qualitative method of data collection would be used. Sampling would be done from among the sick/closed tea estates. The unit of study would be households. The tea gardens in Dooars would be the study area for the research.

Justification of selecting a particular Geographical Area: The research would be conducted in the stressed tea gardens in Dooars area. In the recent past, many newspapers and reports have highlighted that the intensity of food insecurity and hunger deaths in the tea gardens of Dooars are more as compared to other tea gardens in the region.

Data Collection: The proposed research would be build upon the information collected from primary sources although it would use secondary information wherever available.

Tools for Data Collection: The primary data would be collected by using interview schedules, Semi structured interview schedules for Focused Group Discussions. Questionnaires would be used for collecting data from stakeholders like NGOs and CBOs (as per feasibility).

Respondents: Tea Garden Workers, Tea Estate Owners, Trade Union members, NGOs/CBOs working in the area, Government officials and representatives.

Sampling:

Stratified Random sampling procedure would be adopted in selecting the stressed tea gardens. The recent tea board data says that 18% of total tea Gardens in India are sick. Whereas in West Bengal 65 tea gardens out of 377 have been cautioned, which is approximately 18% of the tea gardens.

For this research, 12(20% of the universe) tea gardens would be studied which would be randomly selected from amongst the list of sick and closed tea gardens. 250 respondents would be covered. The number of households to be surveyed would be selected proportionately as per the number of households in the selected tea gardens.
5 case studies would be done.

XII. Data Processing and Analysis:

Data screening and coding would be done. Accordingly, data processing would be done using MS excel and SPSS. Systematic statistical methods would be used to analyze the data.

XIII. Chapterization (Tentative):

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Appendices

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